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ABSTRACT

This paper is intended to help leaders of meetings develop a repertoire of responses that they can use to maintain control over meetings when individuals attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to dominate those meetings. The 15 most common forms of disruptive behavior are listed. The next section suggests eight tactics that a meeting leader might use to retain the ability to conduct a productive interchange among members (including seeking cooperation with the disruptive individual for this one meeting, giving him or her a specific job during the meeting, obtaining agreements from other participants not to support the disruptive individual, and structuring the meeting to enable the group to handle the behavior when it occurs as a review of the processes of the meeting). Next, a set of tactical options that are designed to deal with the disruptive behavior at hand rather than with the individual as a person are presented. Five interventions that a meeting leader can use to turn the disruptive situation to the advantage of the group as a whole are then described (including changing some of the meeting's basic ground rules, breaking up the meeting into smaller groups, and structuring the argument between the dominator and one major opponent as a 5-minute debate). The guide concludes with warnings about the dangers of overusing the techniques described and about the implications when disruptive behavior is a regular feature at meetings. (MN)

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Managing meetings effectively: dealing with disruptive individuals

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MANAGING MEETINGS EFFECTIVELY :

Dealing with Disruptive Individuals

Introduction

This paper is designed to enable leaders of meetings to respond and to maintain control over meetings when individuals attempt, consciously or unconsciously, to dominate those meetings. It suggests that leaders require a repertoire of responses in order to control and to accomplish the objectives of that meeting.

It is assumed that the leader establishes the agenda, designs the format of the meeting, and facilitates the processes. These are the prerogatives and sources of authority and power of the leader and disruptive, disfunctional behaviour of individuals may be intended to take over or subvert the leadership of the meeting, or, to attempt to ensure that the objectives cannot be achieved.

Disruptive Behaviour

The most common forms of disruptive behaviour are:

* Interrupting, cutting off people while they talk, or completing their statements for them.

* Speechmaking, being long-winded, verbose, circumlocutory, and boring; tangential, elliptical, and diffuse contributions.

* Sidetracking, changing topics, issues, and introducing multiple concerns.

* Polarising, pushing people to take sides, forcing a yes/no position, attempting to co-opt others into agreement with one point of view.

* Improperly emotionalising issues, expressing fear about possible outcomes.

* Being aggressive, abrasive, angry, sniping.

* Acting unauthentically as a devil's advocate whatever the issue.

* Challenging the leader about data, sources, rights, legalities, formal processes of a meeting.

* Disabling the group by making constraints ("they won't let us do that").

* Complaining about the leader, the agenda, the meeting, the system.

* Threatening - to resign, seek retribution, take grievance, withholding support.

* Withdrawing from participation and glowering; aggressive non-verbal behaviour.

* Playing "yes, but _", discounting others' contributions, focusing on failure.

* Personalising issues and agenda items, directing or receiving remarks as towards the individual rather than the issue.

* Trivialising items, people; being humorous continuously and inappropriately.

The leader needs to be able to anticipate these dominating postures and prevent their occurrence, an achievable task when members of the meeting group are constant.

Prevention

Several political moves can be made before the meeting to keep intact the leader's ability to conduct a productive interchange among members. They are "power plays", manipulative, and sometimes unpalatable. However, the disruption of an authentic meeting is also unpalatable and, to achieve the objectives of the meeting, drastic action may be necessary.

There are 8 tactics which a leader might consider:

1. Seek co-operation with the individual(s) for this one meeting and ask for agreement for the person(s) not to argue from the usual fixed position.

2. Give the person(s) a specific job during the meeting such as noting points on a flip chart, or notes for future reference.

3. Work out your differences before the meeting to agree to a united front.

4. Meet with the other members to agree not to support the disruptive behaviour by refusing to argue, to confront the behaviour, or to express how they feel about the behaviour when it occurs.

5. Warning the person that the behaviour might be brought out as part of the meeting so that he/she can see specific consequences of continuing with the behaviour.

6. Structure the meeting to enable the group to handle the behaviour when it occurs as a review of the processes of the meeting and their effectiveness in achieving the meeting's objective(s).

7. Take the dominator's agenda items (or items of specific interest) off the meeting's agenda.

8. Not notifying the dominator/disrupter of the meeting.

If these tactics are not feasible, or the cost of employing them is considered to be too high, then the leader will need a repertoire of options for keeping control during the meeting.

Tactical Options

The first set of tactical options have to do with confronting the individual(s) and attempting to change behaviour. These skills are designed to deal with the behaviour or the issue, and not with the individual as a person.

* Model effective listening so that the other may learn how to contribute to the exchange productively.

* Ask the dominator to rephrase questions as statements: this forces the person to take responsibility for expressing a viewpoint rather than blocking the process through continually questioning.

* Ask the dominator to own statements by beginning with "I" rather than "we, you, all of us, they".

* Confront generalisations by the particular; for example, "we all know" can be confronted by "can we check that out", or, "name two who know".

* Selectively ignore statements; choose carefully which ones to which to respond.

* When under attack
  - agree rather than deny
  - agree with the possibility of
  - agree with the logic of
  - ask whether the dominator has any other points of criticism he/she would like to make
  - refuse to deny, excuse, justify your opinion

  This response generally defuses the situation.

* Ask the dominator, after a long intervention, to summarise what has been said in one minute claiming you have lost track of the argument; time carefully the response.

* Reflect the other's feelings and ignore the statement: e.g. "you seem particularly upset when I disagree with you. How are you feeling about our interaction now?"

* Contract to listen to the statement when the other is calmer.

* Respond emotionally to the interventions: e.g. "I feel powerless to accomplish anything here with you, and I become angry when you try to take over by railroading." This puts the onus on the other.

* Point out the win-lose results of argument and refuse to argue.

* Draw out the motives underlying what the other is saying and respond to these rather than the content of the intervention.

However, direct confrontation might put the dominator in an "underdog" position and attract sympathy from other participants. The aim should eventually be to attempt to channel dominator's energies into productive outcomes changing the disruptive member into an effective meeting participant. Over use of confrontation may block achieving that objective, and there are ways of using the situation to maintain control and also to help the meeting group develop greater effectiveness.

Using the Situation

There are five interventions the meeting leader can use so that the disruptive situation can be used to advantage of the group as a whole.

1. If the meeting is following the traditional pattern, change the processes. Stop to consider some basic ground rules for the process:

   - time limits for inputs (use a buzzer)
   - banning certain words, e.g. should, must, ought to, everybody, right, wrong
   - who speaks next

2. Post all points raised on a flip chart without names; this makes the information available to everyone and avoids repetition.

3. Break up the meeting into smaller groups, giving dominator only one or two people to influence. Pair people with opposing views to "interview" each other and ask groups to report back on generated statements/views by consensus.

4. Structure the argument between the dominator and one major opponent (i.e. the one with the most dissimilar viewpoint) as a five minute debate in which other participants take no part but who can observe and later give feedback.

5. Consider drastic action, e.g.

   * adjourn the meeting when the dominator takes over

   * leave the meeting when the dominator takes over disowning responsibility for what is done

   * create chaos and then lead the group out of it thus dispowering the dominator

   * instruct the dominator to leave

Some Warnings

The leader must ensure that any action is designed not to punish, put down, or otherwise destroy the dominating individual. The objective is to promote functional behaviour. Using all these techniques, or too many in rapid succession, can lead to overkill. As such, the leader can generate disruptive behaviour if these techniques are used as a matter of routine, and if not handled sensitively may intimidate other members of the meeting who are less bold or confident, thus reducing their input into the situation.

Finally, disruptive behaviour in meetings as a regular feature are signs of first, permanent conflict over values, individual needs, and life stances. Secondly, they are always a symptom of some defect in the organisation which the meeting is designed to support. Every meeting is always an opportunity for an organisation development session and it should be facilitated as such and in ways which identify problems for later remedial action.

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FURTHER READING

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